DISENGAGEMENT THEORY

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ABSTRACT

Disengagement theory, is the process of individuals withdrawing and isolating from prior social interactions due to age. The disengagement theory of aging states that "aging is an inevitable, mutual withdrawal or disengagement, resulting in decreased interaction between the aging person and others in the social system he belongs to". The theory claims that it is natural and acceptable for older adults to withdraw from society. There are multiple variations in disengagement theory, such as moral disengagement. Disengagement theory was formulated by Cumming and Henry in 1961 in the book Growing Old and was the first theory of aging that social scientists developed. Thus, the theory has historical significance in gerontology. Since then, it has faced strong criticism since the theory was proposed as innate, universal, and unidirectional. The disengagement theory is one of three major psychosocial theories which describe how people develop in old age. The other two major psychosocial theories are the activity theory and the continuity theory, and the disengagement theory comes to odds with both. Disengagement theory was formulated by Cumming and Henry in 1961 in the book Growing Old and was the first theory of aging that social scientists developed. Thus, the theory has historical significance in gerontology. Since then, it has faced strong criticism since the theory was proposed as innate, universal, and unidirectional. The disengagement theory is one of three major psychosocial theories which describe how people develop in old age. The other two major psychosocial theories are the activity theory and the continuity theory, and the disengagement theory comes to odds with both.

***KEYWORDS**: Interactions, isolations, isolate, relax, mood dwelling, approach.*

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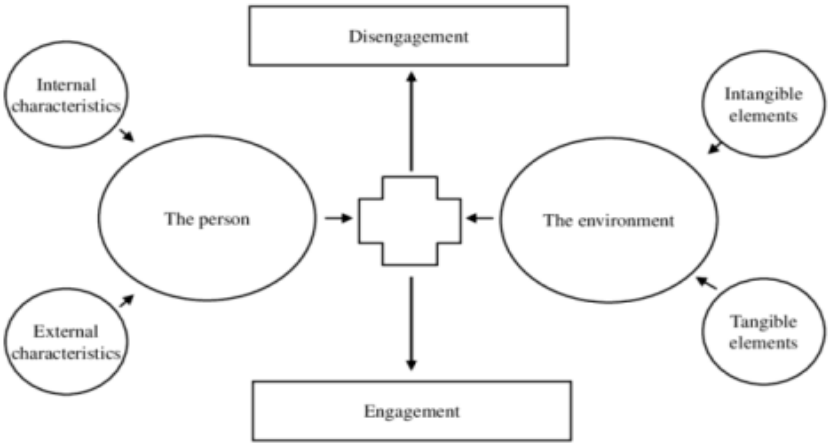
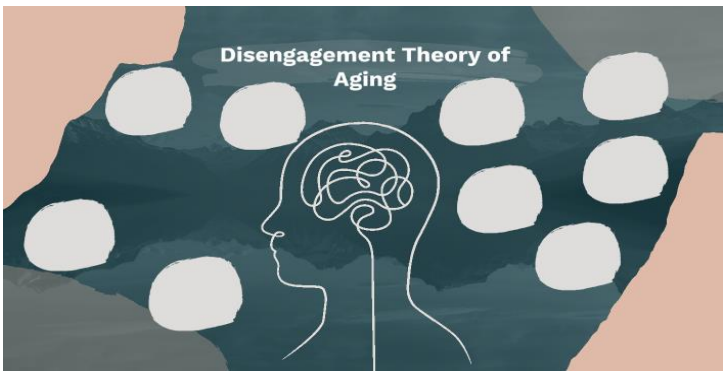
INTRODUCTION:

Often we can see when age increase, people withdraw from social life. Mostly they say excuse as body excuses sleepless nights, tiredness, mood dwelling etc. But all facts are due to the disengagement theory. After many years of work life people often, wish to sit for some time and relax. But some relax and restart. But few relax and isolate. But this isolation and mood dwelling may lead them to an unhealthy life end.





CUMMING AND HENRY PROVIDED THE FOLLOWING NINE POSTULATES FOR THE "PROCESS OF DISENGAGEMENT":

Postulate 1: Everyone expects death, and one's abilities will likely deteriorate over time. As a result, every person will lose ties to others in his or her society.

Postulate 2: Because individual interactions between people strengthen norms, an individual who has fewer varieties of interactions has greater freedom from the norms imposed by interaction. Consequently, this form of disengagement becomes a circular or self-perpetuating process.

Postulate 3: Because men have a centrally instrumental role in America, and women a socioemotional one, disengagement differs between men and women.

Postulate 4: The individual's life is punctuated by ego changes. For example, aging, a form of ego change, causes knowledge and skill to deteriorate. However, success in an industrialized society demands certain knowledge and skill. To satisfy these demands, age-grading ensures that the young possess sufficient knowledge and skill to assume authority, and the old retire before they lose their skills. This kind of disengagement is affected by the individual, prompted by either ego changes or the organization—which is bound to organizational imperatives—or both.

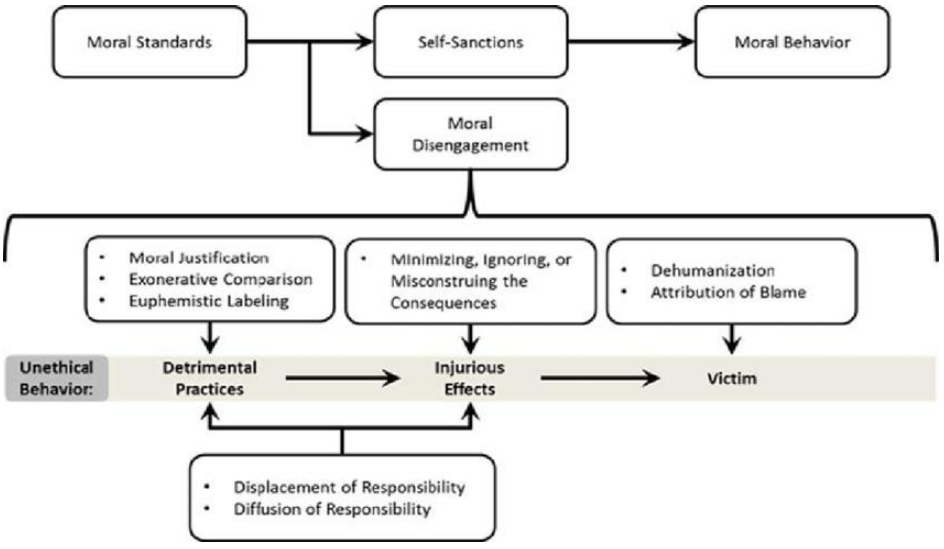
Postulate 5: When both the individual and society are ready for disengagement, complete disengagement results. When neither is ready, continuing engagement results. When the individual is ready and society is not, a disjunction between the expectations of the individual and of the members of this social system results, but engagement usually continues. When society is ready and the individual is not, the result of the disjunction is usually disengagement.

Postulate 6: Man's central role is work, and woman is marriage and family. If individuals abandon their central roles, they drastically lose social living space, and so suffer crisis and demoralization unless they assume the different roles required by the disengaged state.

Postulate 7: This postulate contains two main concepts.

(a) Readiness for disengagement occurs if:
An individual is aware of the shortness of life and the scarcity of time.
Individuals perceive their life space decreasing.
A person loses ego energy.
(b) Each level of society grants individuals permission to disengage because of the following:
Requirements of the rational-legal occupational system in an affluent society
The nature of the nuclear family
The differential death rate
Postulate 8: Fewer interactions and disengagement from central roles lead to the relationships in the remaining roles changing. In turn, relational rewards become more diverse, and vertical solidarities are transformed into horizontal ones.
Postulate 9: Disengagement theory is independent of culture, but the form it takes is bound by culture. Disengagement theory was the first theory of aging developed by social scientists Disengagement theory was created by social scientists Elaine Cumming and William Earle Henry, and presented in the book Growing Old, published in 1961. It is notable for being the first social science theory of aging, and in part, because it was controversially received sparked further development of social science research, and theories about the elderly, their social relationships, and their roles in society. An example of disengagement theory is an older adult who has heart disease may develop shortness of breath may and be unable to continue daily walks with their friends. The older adult will develop less contact with friends which may lead to fading friendships.

- People lose social ties to those around them because they expect death, and their abilities to engage with others deteriorate over time.
- As a person begins to disengage, they are increasingly freed from social norms which guide interaction. Losing touch with norms reinforces and fuels the process of disengagement.
- The disengagement process for men and women differs due to their different social roles.
- The process of disengaging is spurred by an individual's desire to not have their reputation damaged by losing skills and abilities while they are still fully engaged in their social roles. Simultaneously younger adults are trained to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to take over the roles played by those who disengage.
- Complete disengagement happens when both the individual and society are ready for this to occur. A disjunction between the two will occur when one is ready but not the other.
- People who have disengaged adopt new social roles so as not to suffer a crisis of identity or become demoralized.
- A person is ready to disengage when they are aware of the short time remaining in their life and they no longer wish to fulfil their current social roles; and society allows for disengagement in order to provide jobs for those coming of age, to satisfy the social needs of a nuclear family, and because people die.
- Once disengaged, remaining relationships shift, rewards of them may change, and hierarchies may also shift.
- Disengagement occurs across all cultures but is shaped by the culture in which it occurs.



MORAL DISENGAGEMENT AS A PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSTRUCT

Existentialist thinking is a rich source of insight on this phenomenon, because—as we demonstrate—the concept of moral disengagement overlaps significantly with the notion of consciousness in bad faith and the notion of 'not willing oneself free'. These concepts play a critical role in existentialist ethics, and thus existentialists carefully deliberated the phenomenon that these concepts aim to illuminate. Rather than being motivated by self-interest as implied by the bulk of extant empirical work on moral disengagement, existentialist perspectives suggest that moral disengagement can instead be motivated by an overwhelming sense of responsibility towards diverse others. From an existentialist perspective, the temptation to morally disengage will not only be felt by individuals that have a strong, trait-like propensity for moral disengagement, but by managers in general. This temptation is likely to be felt in the specific context of right vs. right dilemmas, which have up to now rarely been studied by moral disengagement scholars. Even though existentialist thought paints the problem of moral disengagement as more widespread and entrenched in the human condition, it also suggests ways of preventing moral disengagement.

PRINCIPLES OF PRIMARY CARE OF OLDER ADULTS

In the 1950s and early 1960s, gerontologists disagreed as to which psychological approach to aging was healthier. Many endorsed the disengagement theory, which posited that letting go of the trappings of earlier life was the key to successful aging. The icon of this theory was an old man in a rocking chair on the front porch. Other gerontologists were advocates of the activity theory, who believed that staying active and engaged was the key to healthy aging. Their icons were people whom some referred to as representatives of exceptional aging, people like Pablo Casals, who in his 90s was still actively performing as a musician. As the data came in, it became clear that activity and engagement are healthier for most older persons than disengagement. That is, of course, provided the individual is realistic and makes the needed adjustments to losses and changing life circumstances discussed in the previous section.

Unfortunately, the retirement industry was founded based on the disengagement theory and has been slow to adjust. The developers of Sun City, Arizona—the prototypical retirement community on which thousands of others were subsequently gerontologists who were proponents of disengagement.14 This led to the creation of communities prohibiting adult residents younger than 55 years (and children), focused on leisure activities, such as golf and shuffleboard, and encouraged the attitude, "You've worked hard; you deserve to relax."

Attitudes are, however, beginning to change, but they still have a long way to go. To promote healthy engagement in late life, more work opportunities need to be created for older adults that are interesting, part-time, flexible and adapted to promote continued productive engagement. Older persons need to be engaged as volunteers and entrepreneurs, and older adults need more opportunities to be integrated into the rest of society. Such developments are consistent with current theories of "successful aging" and may well keep older adults in the workforce and volunteer service longer, providing a clear benefit to broader society.

Engaging with difficult topics and emotional experiences in psychotherapy: A study of helpful therapist acts

Objective: The purpose of this study was to explore moments during psychotherapy sessions in which clients experience that they have an opportunity to approach and engage with difficult topics and emotional experiences, with the aim of describing therapists' acts that support clients' in-session engagement.

Methods: Two treatment sessions of 11 participants were videotaped and immediately followed by an in-depth semi-structured interview, using the interpersonal process recall (IPR) interview method. A follow-up interview was conducted 3 months after the final IPR interview. Participants' accounts were analyzed using thematic analyses.

Results: Five themes of engagement-supportive acts resulted from our analyses:

1. inviting the client by showing acceptance;
2. recognizing the clients' hints and try-out signs;
3. providing information on the process and evaluating clients' expectations;
4. actively helping the clients to notice and stay with the difficult experience
5. Show sensitivity to the client's needs for micropauses.

Clients found it was engagement-supportive when therapists implicitly and explicitly recognized the challenges of being in psychotherapy. This recognition could be achieved through the engagement-supportive acts described in the five themes. Therapists should continually make space for and seek a balance between different engagement-supportive acts.

CRITIQUES OF THE THEORY OF DISENGAGEMENT:

The year 1961 was a watershed in the emergence of theory in the field of aging. That year saw the publication of Elaine Cumming and William Henry's book Growing Old, in which the term disengagement was introduced. This was the first time a distinct theory of aging emerged in scientific form, signaling the beginning of theoretical consciousness in social gerontology and setting the stage for the development of a range of alternative

theoretical challenges. Cumming and Henry described disengagement as "an inevitable mutual withdrawal . . . resulting in decreased interaction between the aging person and others in the social systems he belongs to." Their study was based on data generated from the Kansas City Study of Adult Life, wherein age comparisons of levels of various kinds of social involvement and ego investment, as well as attitudinal changes, provided evidence of the disengagement process. Informed by Talcott Parsons' social systemic theorizing, Cumming and Henry argued that aging could not be understood separately from the characteristics of the social system in which it is experienced. In turning to the social system for clues to the aging process, the authors explained a person's actions in terms of the ongoing operations of the system of which he or she is a part. For example, in modern societies, with the emphasis placed on standards of achievement and efficiency, the social system, in order to be a viable one, requires its work to be done effectively and expeditiously. Elderly persons, they argued, do not contribute to the system with the comparative efficiency of younger adults, and thus present a burden to it. The functional maintenance of social systems, therefore, requires some mechanism for systematically disengaging older persons from major life roles, roles critical to social system maintenance.

While people make decisions concerning their life course, the choices they make are normatively defined. By internalizing the norms and values of society (thus becoming fully socialized), the individual becomes part of the social order, carrying out the needs of the social system of which he or she is a part. The individual, in disengagement theory, in effect takes it as his or her obligation to disengage for the benefit of the social system. The extent to which one actualizes disengagement will determine how well one is adjusted or happy in old age. As Cumming and Henry state, "The factor with the greatest bearing on morale seems to be the ability to disengage"

The ultimate form of disengagement is death. As aging persons withdraw from more and more social roles, they come closer to final preparation for separation from the social order. By gracefully removing oneself from society and making room for others, one is "free to die" (Cumming and Henry, p. 227), without disrupting the equilibrium of the system. Dying, therefore, is the final contribution one makes to societal functioning. Death, in time, sustains the ultimate efficiency of the social system.

Disengagement theory analyses individual adjustment in old age by focusing on the needs and requirements of the social system. The process of disengagement is a gradual one, with continued withdrawal in later life being the hallmark of success. Cumming and Henry compared people age eighty and over with those in their seventies; the former are described as more adjusted because of their greater degree of disengagement. Individuals, in effect, must aim toward becoming more and more "settled" in old age. To the extent this is achieved, society remains in a state of equilibrium. However, when the process fails—when persons remain engaged well into later life—it represents a dysfunctional infringement on system maintenance. These "late-life engagers" represent the problem of old age in disengagement theory. By disrupting "social necessity," they present a burden to system efficiency. As such, the system is responsible for either providing room for their quirks or forcing them to disengage along with others, who, by and large, typify disengagement. In the disengagement process, it is eventually system adjustments and readjustments that sustain the norm. In effect, the system's long-term equilibrating needs stand as its own system of adjustment.

Disengagement theory generated considerable controversy in the field of aging (see Hochschild, 1975, 1976, for a review of this debate). Activity theorists, especially the symbolic interactionists (e.g., Rose, 1964), referred to the idyllic, unreal qualities of the disengagement argument. They also brought to bear data showing that individuals resented forms of disengagement such as mandatory retirement and other age-related exclusionary policies. Furthermore, data were marshaled to show that older workers were not necessarily less efficient than younger ones.

Responding to the controversy, Cumming and Henry offered separate revisions of their theory. In her article entitled, "Further Thoughts on the Theory of Disengagement" (1963), Cumming reacted to the problem of differential adjustment or individual variations in the disengagement process by offering a psychobiological explanation for it. According to this approach, those who are temperamental "impinges" are most likely to remain engaged, while "selectors" are most likely to disengage in later life. Aside from this amendment, the theory remains essentially the same. Henry's (1965) more extreme revision of disengagement theory practically abandons it in favour of a more expressly developmental perspective.

Arlie Hochschild (1975, 1976) also presented both a theoretical and empirical critique of Cumming and Henry's argument, addressing vaguely defined concepts and logical flaws in the approach. She summarized these as the "escape clause," "omnibus variable," and "assumption of meaning" problems. The "escape clause" refers to the fact that the theory is unfalsifiable. Hochschild presented evidence, obtained from Cumming and Henry's own data, showing that a significant proportion of elderly persons do not systematically withdraw from society. Yet, Hochschild pointed out, Cumming and Henry's descriptions of these kinds of older people as being "unsuccessful" adjusters to old age, "off time" disengagers or members of "a biological and possibly

psychological elite" (Hochschild, 1975, p. 555) provide a means for "explaining" virtually any type of continued engagement in later life, making the theory impossible to refute empirically.

The "omnibus variable" problem refers to the over-inclusiveness of the variable's age and disengagement in Cumming and Henry's approach. Hochschild described age and disengagement as "'umbrella' variables that crowd together, under single titles, many distinct phenomena." For example, while an elderly person may experience disengagement from former work associates, he or she may, at the same time, be more community-involved, church-centered, or family-oriented. Hochschild argued that the use of these two variables to explain adjustment in old age ignores the diverse and complex processes involved in growing older.

The "assumption of meaning" problem refers to the theory's preference for inferring compliance from behavior. Cumming and Henry argued that elderly individuals willingly withdraw from society; yet, they did not provide data to adequately address this issue. For Hochschild, "What is missing is evidence about the meaning of the daily acts that constitute engagement or disengagement" (1976, p. 66).

The disengagement approach also has been criticized for ignoring the impact of social class on aging experiences. Laura Olson (1982) argued, for example, that the theory's "free-market conservative" view leaves unquestioned how the class structure and its social relationships prevent the majority of older people from enjoying a variety of opportunities or advantages. Disengagement theory precludes virtually any type of social conflict. Indeed, when one confronts his or her society or has some self-investment in it, he or she is considered to be maladjusted, a form of deviance from this perspective.

Cumming and Henry's social systemic theorizing painted a very deterministic picture of human behavior. Their approach ultimately depicts the individual as being fused with society, becoming what Alvin Gouldner (1970) called an "eager tool" of the system. Lacking the freedom to act "on their own," persons exist within the system only by virtue of carrying out behavior that is normatively prescribed. There is no sense, from this point of view, that people can recognize their own interests as members of society. What they do recognize is the realization of an internal social program that moves them along. And, since it's the systematically normative movement of members that disengagement theory is concerned with, individual aging experiences disappear altogether. The details, the circumstantial contingencies, and the variety of ongoing situations, wherein persons experience their social lives, are treated as nuances on common systemic themes. Thus, we're left with little understanding of how members of a social system grow older in it, except for a very general conception of socialization.

Despite the limitations of disengagement theory, it has had a profound effect on the field of aging. Its emergence marked the first time formal theoretical concerns had gained the attention of gerontologists. This set the stage for the development of a number of alternative theoretical viewpoints, including exchange theory, sub-culture theory, the age stratification approach, modernization theory, and the political economy perspective. Disengagement theory continues to influence research that examines the place of older adults in society at large. Some critics pointed out that this was a flawed social science theory because Cummings and Henry assume that the process is natural, innate, and inevitable, as well as universal. Evoking a fundamental conflict within sociology between functionalist and other theoretical perspectives, some pointed out that the theory completely ignores the role of class in shaping the experience of aging, while others critiqued the assumption that the elderly have seemingly no agency in this process, but rather are compliant tools of the social system. Further, based on subsequent research, others asserted that the theory of disengagement fails to capture the complex and rich social lives of the elderly, and the many forms of engagement that follow retirement. The most damning critiques of disengagement theory argued that much disengagement from social roles was involuntary, occurring, for example, through widowhood and retirement. For all its faults, disengagement theory at least tried to be a theory, but it was not precisely conceptualized, making it difficult to test.

CONCLUSION:

Early research on social support and aging had a pessimistic attitude regarding older adults' need to remain socially engaged (eg, Disengagement theory); however, more recent research has found that aging adults are satisfied with their relationships in later life and that aging adults tend to experience fewer conflicts in the relationships that they do have. These findings may be due, in part, to conflict resolution strategies that are employed by older (but not younger) adults, an increased "say" in how leisurely time is spent, and greater selectivity in terms of whom an aging person chooses to spend time with (eg, preference for those who provide a rewarding relationship). There is a robust body of literature showing that social support has repeatedly been linked to better health and cognitive/mental outcomes. Interventions designed to increase social ties among "at risk" older adults have been met with some success. Overall, the research suggests that social systems do not necessarily diminish with time, in fact, relationships appear to be more rewarding and satisfactory as adults age.

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